# Russian Subjugation of the Central Caucasus: The War Against the Mountaineers


## The War Against the Mountaineers

Though little known, Russia's Caucasian campaigns from 1801 to 1864 constitute one of the most fascinating and instructive episodes in modern warfare. Pitted against the determined, resourceful Muslim tribes of the mountains and forests of the central Caucasus, Russia's military forces compiled a frustrating record that reflected many of the difficulties inherent in armed conflicts between Western-style, conventional armies and non-Western, unconventional forces in theaters lacking a highly developed transportation and communications infrastructure common to urbanized societies. Repeated Russian failures, the product of errors and the increasingly skillful leadership of the resistance, forced Russian military analysts to reexamine their approach. In the end, the conquest of the interior Caucasus depended upon the Russians' gradual recognition of the distinctive nature of their opponents and the local conditions, subsequent adaptations of their strategy and tactics in the face of intellectual and institutional inertia, and relentless and methodical prosecution of the war.

The southward extension of Russian imperial power into the Caucasus during the nineteenth century reflected the logic of political geography. Unchecked either by natural barriers or the once powerful empires of Ottoman Turkey and Persia, Russian penetration of the Caucasus was inevitable. Although Russian involvement in the Caucasus began in the sixteenth century when Ivan IV (the Terrible) established relations with the little kingdom of Kabarda at the northern edge of the Caucasus Mountains, only under Catherine II (1762—96), two centuries later, did Russia possess the might to assert direct influence in the region.[1] Thanks to the efforts of Prince Grigory Potemkin, appointed first viceroy of the Caucasus in 1785, and the gifted General Alexander Suvorov, Russian columns campaigned deep into the Caucasus to extend Russian power on the Caspian and Black Sea coasts. However, with Catherine's death, Russian forces withdrew northward to the so-called Caucasian Line—a string of forts, fortified points, and Cossack settlements following the Kuban and Terek Rivers across the northern tier of the Caucasus. The Caucasian Line defined the southernmost limit of effective Russian control over the land, populace, and lines of communication.

Catherine II (the Great)

A single event, Russia's annexation of the small Christian kingdom of Georgia in 1801, solidified Russia's long-term stake in the heart of the Caucasus. In 1799, Georgii XII, Georgia's ruler, sought Russian protection to avoid destruction of his kingdom by his more numerous Muslim neighbors, especially Persia and Turkey. By forcing reunification of the old Georgian lands and defeating Persia, Tsar Alexander I obtained title to a band of territory extending from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea along the southern rim of the Caucasus Mountains. However, in asserting sovereignty over Georgia, Russia also claimed the intervening territories northward to the Caucasian Line (see map 1). But the predominantly Muslim tribes native to this area proved far less willing to give their allegiance to a Christian sovereign. Thus, in practical terms, Georgia formed an island of tsarist power in the southern Caucasus. Consolidation of Russia's position in the Caucasus required the subjugation of the tribes hemmed in between Georgia and the Caucasian Line.

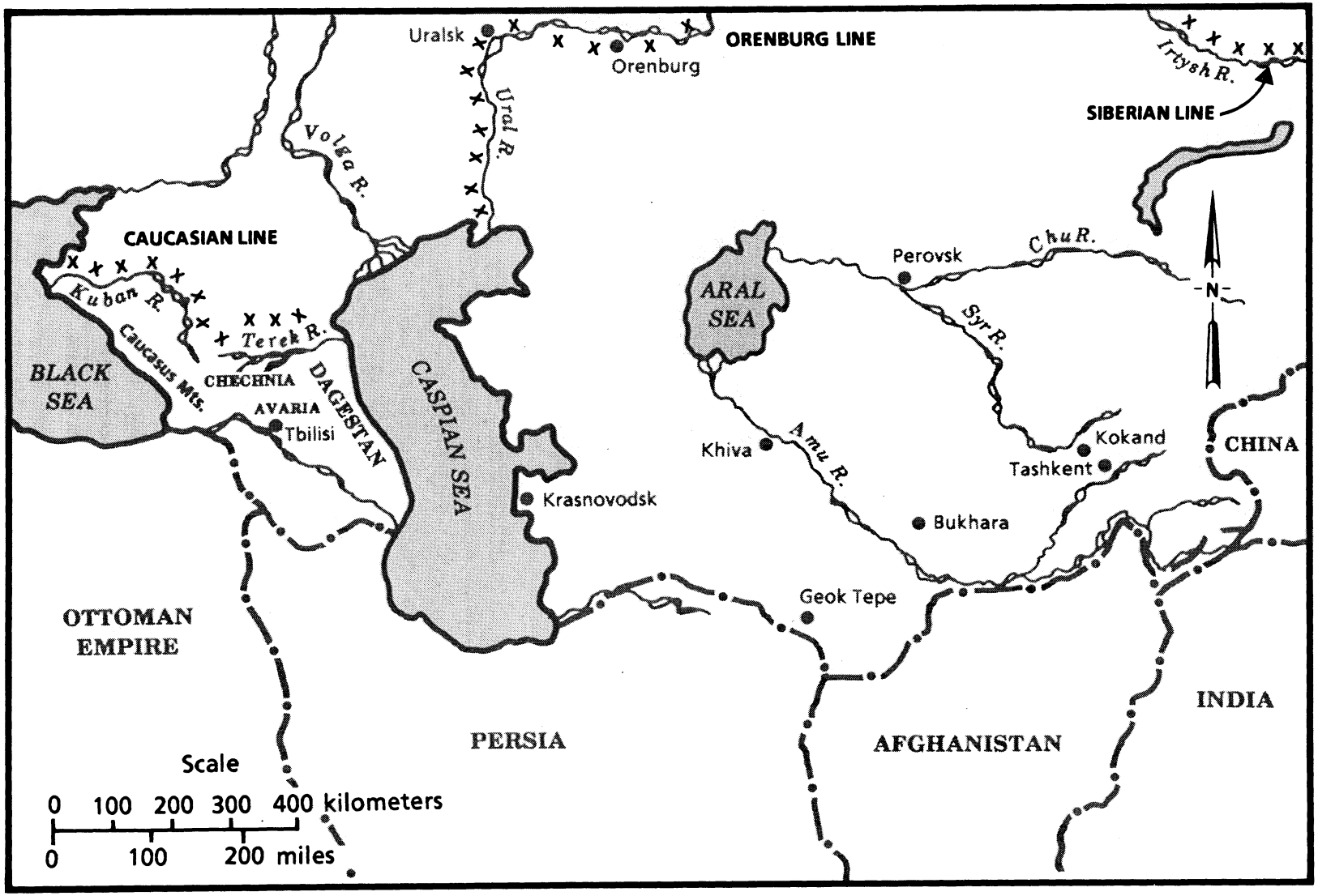
## *Theater Overview*

Home to a cluster of ancient peoples, the Caucasus region has served historically as a crossroads between Europe and Asia, a meeting ground of

Prince Grigory Potemkin

cultures, and, frequently, a battleground. By the early nineteenth century, the inhabitants of the region numbered about 2 million. Prominent among them were the Christian peoples of Georgia and Armenia in the south and the Muslim Azeris along the Caspian Sea shore. Less well known, but central to Russia's strategic problem, were the diverse tribesmen of the interior mountains and forests, with an aggregate population of about one-half million.[2] The chief bastions of resistance to the imposition of Russian rule proved to be in Dagestan, Chechnia, and Avaria in the east and the Kuban River basin in the west.

At its peak, the zone of struggle in the central Caucasus spanned a distance of about 600 kilometers from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea and approximately 200 kilometers from the Groznaia fortress in the north to Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, in the south. The outstanding topographical feature of the region is the Caucasus Mountains, through which travel was often confined to steep trails and slender defiles. Rugged peaks and deep river gorges carved Dagestan into countless small, remote pockets of arable terrain characteristically flanked by thick forests, which dominated neighboring Chechnia, Avaria, and most of the periphery of the mountains. The isolation nature imposed on the mountain and forest tribes profoundly influenced their cultures. Speaking a variety of languages and dialects, they



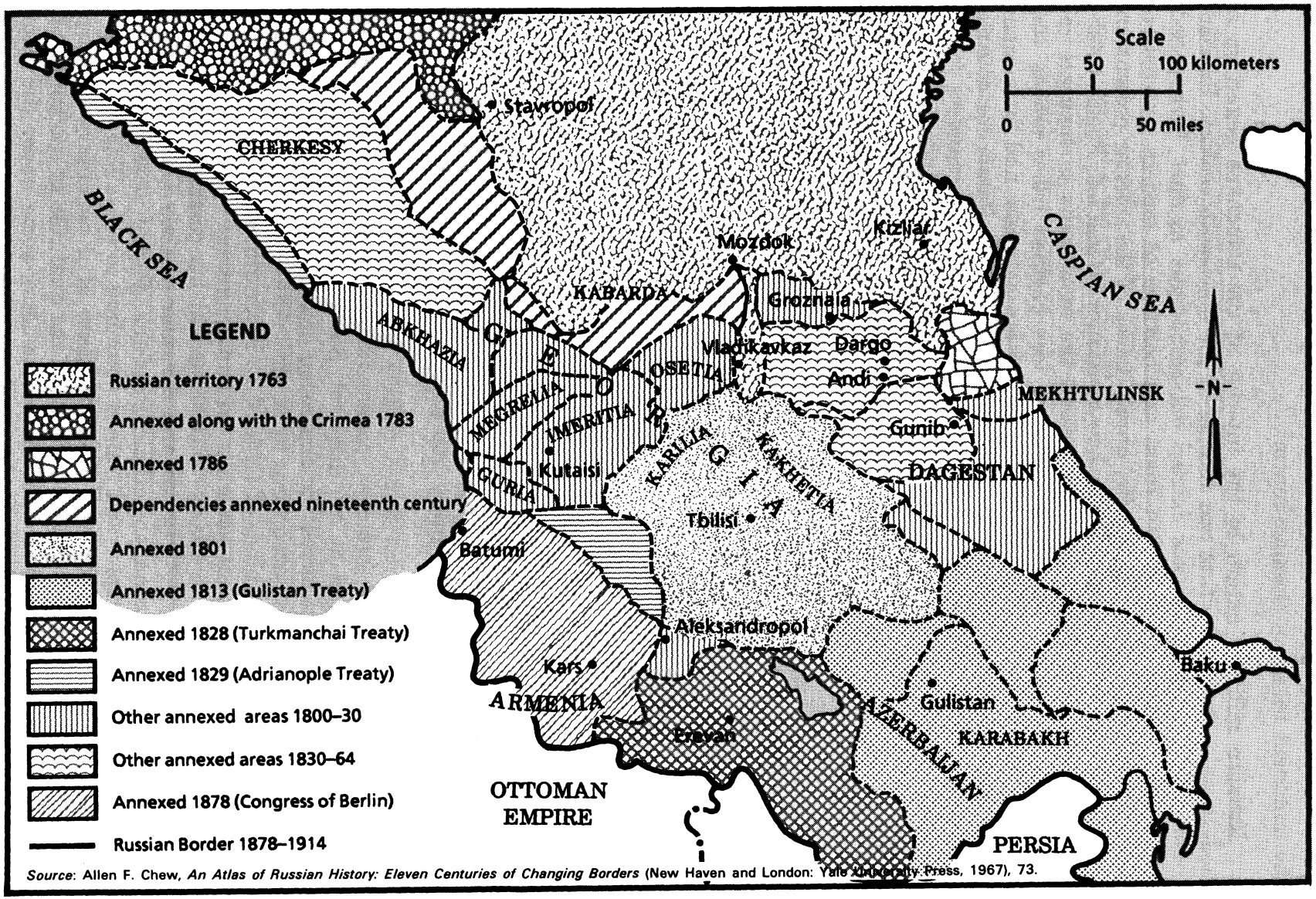

Map 1. Russia's southern frontier in the nineteenth century

lacked any semblance of unity—at least until driven to band together by the imminent threat of Russian control.

Russian military action in the interior of the Caucasus began on a modest scale. During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Russian commanders in the Caucasus carried out campaigns against Turkey and Persia and secured the Caspian coast and portions of modern Azerbaijan (see map 2). Only gradually did the unruly tribes of the interior present an apparent threat to Russian rule. As their resistance intensified, Russia established a cordon of fortified points around the mountains to separate rebellious mountaineers from those more or less pacified tribes among the foothills. The latter, in close proximity to Russian outposts, had little capacity to resist Russian arms and even came to depend on Russia for defense against mountain raiders. However, successive Russian commanders found it increasingly difficult to contain the mountaineers and demanded a steady expansion of forces merely to maintain the status quo in the northern Caucasus. Russian General Aleksei Petrovich Ermolov viewed the mountains as a "great fortress," equally difficult to storm or besiege.[3]

Russia's subjugation of the central Caucasus is loosely divisible into three stages. During the first stage, from 1801 to 1832, Russia committed limited means to execute what it perceived as a police action that entailed the prevention of mountaineer raids on commercial traffic and friendly villages. During this period, the Caucasian Corps campaigned intermittently, remaining largely on the defensive while maintaining a network of small garrisons. From approximately 1832 to 1845, the mountaineer resistance, fired by the charismatic leadership of Shamil, grew tremendously and challenged the stability of Russian rule. Repeated Russian attempts to crush the mountaineers in a single, large-scale campaign ended in failure. From 1845 to 1859, Russia combined a more patient, methodical approach to the war with a larger commitment of forces. This stage witnessed relentless Russian campaigning along the edges of the mountaineers' strongholds that systematically reduced the territory and population under their control.

The expansion of Russian forces reflects the course of the Caucasian War. As of 1818, General Ermolov, commander of the Caucasus, had no more than 60,000 regulars at his disposal. Subsequent escalation of the struggle during the 1840s forced the expansion of Russian strength to about 200,000 men.[4] Ultimately, according to A. Zisserman, a contemporary observer as well as the biographer of General A. I Bariatinskii, the "conqueror of the Caucasus," all of that general's brilliant planning would have come to nothing had he not had nearly 300,000 men at his command.[5] Russian forces consisted of a mix of regular and irregular (mainly Cossack) units. The former were predominantly ethnic Russians, former peasants drawn from the interior of the empire and trained according to prevailing European norms. The Cossacks, in contrast, were members of a hereditary military class who frequently served on the frontier in the dual role of warriors and colonists. Small native militia formations, including some under the command of native officers, provided additional manpower and were employed




*Source*: Allen F. Chew, *An Atlas of Russian History: Eleven Centuries of Changing Borders* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), 73.

Map 2. The Caucasus and Transcaucasia, 1763—1914

General Alekséi Petrovich Ermolov, the first Russian commander in the Caucasus (1816—27) to confront the mountaineers

extensively for convoy duty. Georgians made up the largest share of the native irregulars.[6]

No one could envision in 1801 the scale of commitment that would be required to subjugate the seemingly backward populace of the mountains. Unknown to most Russians, centuries of struggle against one another and outside invaders had made the mountaineers masters of survival and nurtured among them a warrior tradition based on individual cunning and fearlessness. Until late in the war, when they obtained some modern rifles, the insurgents' arms included sabers, old muskets, and cannon. The mountaineers, however, were able tacticians on the defense or in staging small, guerrilla-style incursions. Experience taught them never to engage a superior enemy when he could bring his full power to bear but rather to use nature as their ally and lure the enemy into combat on unfavorable terms. Yet for all the mountaineers' martial virtues, shifting patterns of alliance and old rivalries restricted even the most elementary coordination of their efforts against a common adversary.

## *The Caucasian War*

For three decades after the Georgian annexation, Russian authorities believed that the mountaineers posed little more than a nuisance to be subdued by scattered police actions. Then, the catalytic force of a religious movement, dubbed "muridism" by the Russians, and the appearance in 1834 of a shrewd and charismatic leader, Shamil, infused new strength into the resistance. (Indeed, the awkward term "muridism" was coined by the Rus-

sians from the word "murid," or disciple, as the leader's closest adherents were known.) Shamil combined religious appeal, uncommon political savvy, and the overt threat of force to weld together a military-political alliance of the mountain tribes under so-called *naibs*, or regional commanders. In so doing, Shamil changed the nature of the war—in actuality remaking the contest into a real war. Within a few years, he established a standing infantry and cavalry, raised by levy in each region, and his motley army increasingly resembled a regular European force. Shamil imposed a system of ranks and initiated the manufacture of cannon and gunpowder for his fledgling artillery.[7]

The strategic center of Shamil's power lay among the tribes of Dagestan in the eastern mountains, but his support by the Chechen tribes along the forested northern slopes and foothills was equally crucial in providing him manpower and essential supplies. Only slightly less important were the Lezgian tribes of the southern fringes of the mountains. This study will focus on the subjugation by the Russians of the eastern mountain region under Shamil's direct control.

The western Caucasus (comprising the Transkuban region and the Black Sea coast) was the scene of concurrent military actions, but from 1821, it constituted a separate theater. Though Shamil formed no alliance with the tribes of the Transkuban, his long-term fortunes depended, in part, on the dispersal of Russian forces there. Furthermore, it was the actions of the Abkhazians and other tribes along the Black Sea that raised the intermittent possibility of foreign intervention against Russia. Turkey, with diplomatic backing from Britain, saw in the uprising of the Caucasian tribes an opportunity to restore its former influence along the eastern shore of the Black Sea. Britain, meanwhile, viewed the Caucasus within the context of the great "Eastern Question," the contest for dominance of the Black Sea and the straits leading to it, which Britain hoped to deny to Russia.[8]

When he assumed command of the Caucasus in 1816, General Ermolov had little cause to expect that this would be the theater of the longest sustained conflict in Russian history. With the defeat of Napoleon in 1812—13 and the triumphant march of Russian forces to Paris still a vivid memory, the military might of the empire seemed irresistible. However, Ermolov was a sharp analyst of military and political situations and soon appreciated that the task before him would stretch his resources to the limit. Given the responsibility for defending the 700-mile Caucasian perimeter against raiders, who at any time might sally forth from hidden recesses, Ermolov responded by establishing forts such as Groznaia on the Terek River and Vnezapnaia beyond the Aksai River at the edge of Chechnia. In addition, he campaigned vigorously along the periphery of Dagestan, bringing Tarku, Kurin, the Kazikumukh khanates, Akusha, and most of Large and Small Chechnia under direct imperial authority.

Ermolov thereby became the first Russian chief of the Caucasus to thrust himself directly into the affairs of the mountaineers, who had scarcely ever been subject to interference by outsiders.[9] Historians dispute the effectiveness

of Ermolov's military and administrative policies. To his credit, he was among the first Russian commanders to appreciate the importance of opening lines of communications with Russia itself and among key garrisons while maintaining pressure on hostile Chechen tribes by clearing roads into the forests to facilitate the rapid movement of Russian columns. By establishing a fort at Vnezapnaia in 1812, however, Russia alarmed the mountain chieftains with its encroachment. Ermolov also co-opted the elites of friendly tribes, making them officials in his administration. This approach contrasted sharply with his brutal, punitive raids against unsubmissive tribes. For insubordination, Ermolov exacted a stiff price through the wholesale destruction of crops, forests, and villages. In so doing, Ermolov acknowledged that he could not always distinguish between friendly and hostile tribes and that many villages were divided in their opinion of Russian rule. Meanwhile, by the late 1820s, resistance in Dagestan had grown dramatically.[10]

Ermolov reported in 1826 that the mountaineer rebellion was ever more assuming a religious character—a transformation of ominous portent.[11] An uprising among the Chechens in 1826—coinciding with a Persian invasion of Russian-held territory in the south—shattered the illusory calm and convinced Tsar Nicholas I that the advances of the preceding decade were insufficient. Ermolov soon relinquished command in the Caucasus to one of the tsar's favorites, General (Count) I. F. Paskevich. With Nicholas' mandate, Paskevich systematically Russified his administration. Such actions reflected the Russians' erroneous assumption that they could effectively govern peoples farther removed from them in culture and custom than Dagestan was from St. Petersburg and over whom Russia could not consistently assert its authority. If the Christian Georgians were pliable, the Muslim mountain tribes certainly were not. Yet Russia's military presence diminished throughout the remainder of the decade, as wars with Persia (1826) and Turkey (1828—29) held the attention of Russian commanders. During this time, a religious and political leader, Kazi-mullah, gained a following in the mountains and appealed for a holy war against the Russians in 1828. During the next several years, mountain tribesmen attacked Tarku, a small kingdom allied to Russia, as well as Russian fortresses at Vnezapnaia, Burnaia, and Derbent. His resources limited, Paskevich slightly strengthened Russian defenses in the region but concluded that Russia must eventually choose between appeasement or the annihilation of the mountain resistance.[12] Perhaps his greatest contribution was the undertaking of the first military topographical survey of the region, which resulted in the first reasonably complete maps of the Caucasus in 1834. Still, details of the interior mountainous regions remained sketchy.[13] The outbreak of revolt in Poland in 1831 further diverted Russian attention from the Caucasus and necessitated Field Marshal (as of 1829) Paskevich's departure. Thus, little progress was made in the pacification of the Caucasus under Paskevich.

Characteristic of military actions against the mountaineers during this period was an expedition mounted under Lieutenant General G. V. Rosen in 1830 to capture Kazi-mullah at his residence in the village of Gimri. Advancing into the mountains with a force of nearly 5,000 men, Rosen

Events elsewhere diverted General (Count) Paskevich's attention from the mountaineer problem

compelled area tribes to submit but failed to capture Kazi-mullah. Still, Rosen assumed that the point of Russian superiority in arms had been proven and withdrew his column. In reality, the tribes reverted to their past behavior, and the campaign achieved nothing. In the words of N. F. Dubrovin, a nineteenth-century Russian historian of the war in the Caucasus, "It [the expedition] remained only a testament to the absence of firmness, persistence and definition in the orders from our side."[14] Dubrovin's point was well taken in so far as Rosen labored under the contrary guidance that he must, on the one hand, bring the mountaineers to heel, while, on the other, minimize his use of force and encourage trade relations. In addition, Rosen lacked the power of theaterwide command vested in Paskevich. An 1835 directive from the war minister, Prince A. I. Chernyshev, specified objectives, the size of forces to be employed, and individual field commanders for the coming year.[15] Wise or not, the policy failed.

Immediately after Rosen's withdrawal from Gimri, Kazi-mullah summoned a council of mullahs and elders of area tribes and laid out his future

plan to unify the tribes of the eastern Caucasus to drive out the Russians. Accordingly, Rosen reported to Chernyshev the futility of conducting scattered campaigns to places Russia had neither the capacity nor intent to hold. The result of such actions was to disperse the natives temporarily while antagonizing them in the long run. However, what most troubled Rosen was his belief that the menace was increasing. Given their warlike character and great resourcefulness, the mountaineers might be a menace to Russian rule if united by Kazi-mullah. Thus, to secure the Caucasian Line, Rosen required far more than the 15 infantry regiments (54,000 men) and garrison forces on hand.[16]

Though it briefly raised Russian hopes, the sudden death of Kazi-mullah during the Russian campaign on Gimri in 1832 did not spell the end of resistance. Rather, what followed belied all expectations. After a brief interim, Shamil, Kazi-mullah's deputy, succeeded as imam and surpassed his mentor both as a charismatic leader and as a pragmatic organizer. Well-educated in the traditions of the Islamic faith, Shamil had also absorbed essential lessons of warfare that made him a formidable strategic adversary. Through the preceding two decades of fighting, the mountaineers had lacked the concentration and coordination of forces needed to inflict any but minor defeats on the Russians. So deficient were the mountaineers in conducting offensive tactical operations more complex than an ordinary raid that the Russians considered a detachment of several companies sufficient to constitute an independent force. The mountaineers repeatedly proved unable to defeat a disciplined formation and showed no capacity whatever to cope effectively with artillery.[17]

The resulting complacency engendered among Russian commanders is evident in their failure to follow up the defeat of Kazi-mullah and press the attack aggressively against the rebels during the middle and late 1830s.[18] Unaware of the qualitative transformation taking place in the enemy in the mountains, the commander of the Caucasian Corps concentrated his attention on securing the Black Sea and Caspian Sea coastlines. In essence, the Russians assumed a reactive posture, responding to enemy raids but failing to engage the mountain tribes in any systematic fashion. The Russians' concomitant failure to strengthen imperial rule among the submissive tribes along the fringes of the mountains carried the seeds of great trouble to follow. Friendly peoples in the region were constantly exposed to the predations and intimidations of their more warlike neighbors in the mountains. For example, in 1834, the mountaineers struck at Khunzakh, center of the strategically positioned Avar khanate, and exterminated the ruling family, which had been loyal to Russia. Under such circumstances, stable rule was impossible.[19]

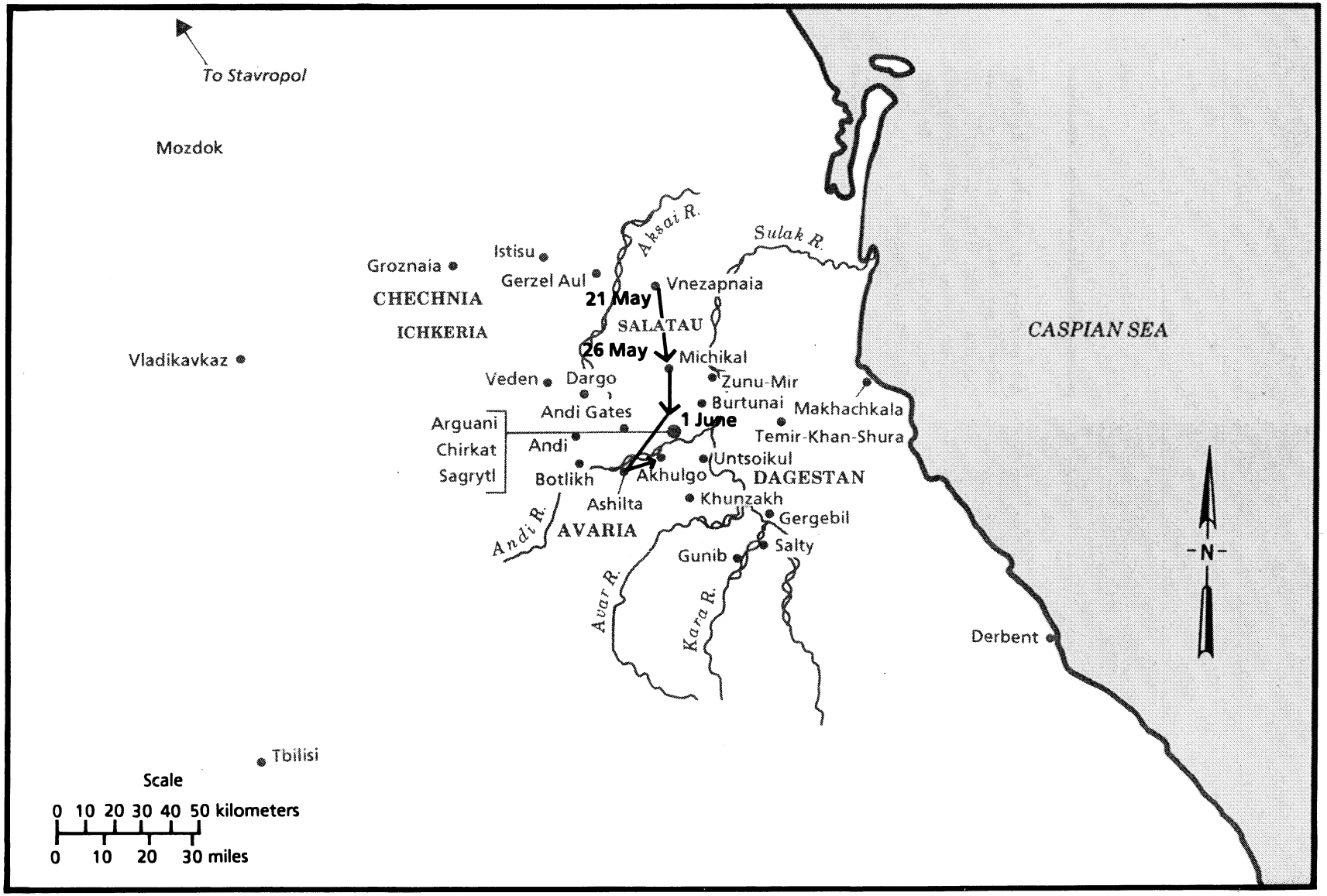
If the Russians failed to develop an overall approach to the struggle in the Caucasus, the same error cannot be attributed to Shamil. The new imam exploited the breathing space to consolidate his authority and organize a political-economic system as near to an overarching polity as the mountain tribes had ever known. Though he based his claim to power on religious authority, Shamil also was a consummate politician, drawing on every

resource at his disposal to forge an alliance among the doggedly independent chieftains. Unswerving in his goals, he refused the offer of a pardon from the tsar in 1837 in exchange for his recognition of imperial authority. Instead, Shamil tended to the defense of the mountains. He urged the populace in exposed (to the Russians) parts of Chechnia to withdraw their villages deeper into the forests, both to reduce their vulnerability and to deny their food, property, and services to the Russian Army.[20] Furthermore, he created a support system by which the inhabitants of a village destroyed by the Russians would be sheltered by neighboring tribes until the next harvest.[21] Shamil established his own headquarters at the well-fortified village of Akhulgo, deep in the mountains along the Andi River (see map 3). Accessible only by difficult routes and perched atop rocky heights flanked on three sides by precipitous river gorges, Akhulgo enjoyed an ideal natural defensive position.

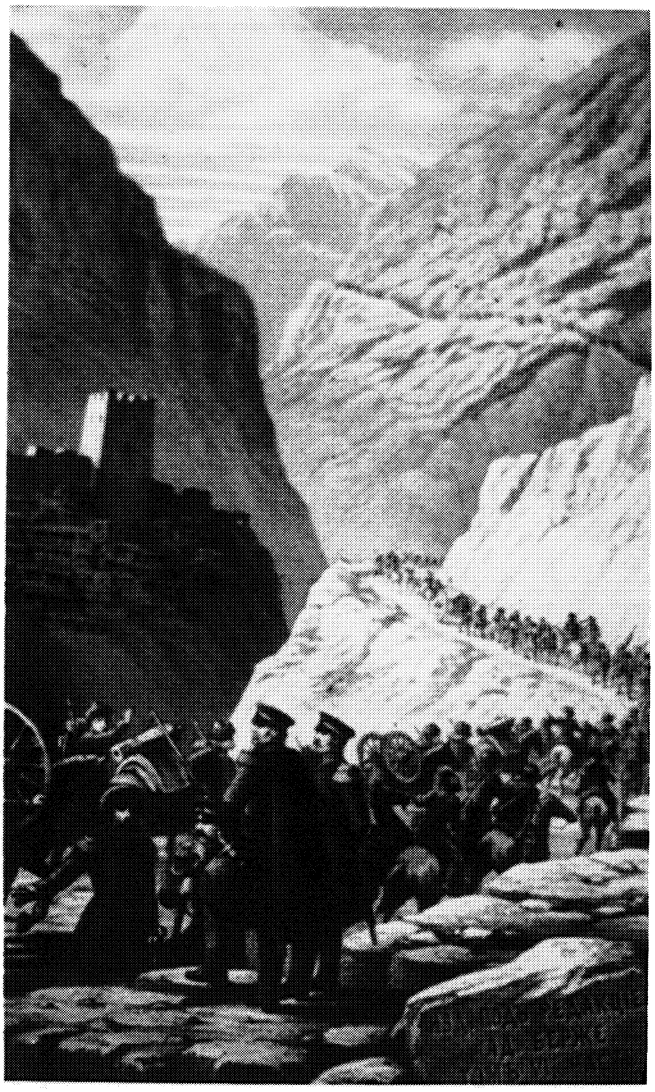
When the Russians resolved to mount an expedition to Akhulgo in 1839 to capture Shamil, the commander, General P. Kh. Grabbe, selected a route about fifty miles long, beginning at the fortress at Vnezapnaia and running through Salatau and Gumbet, both bastions of support for Shamil. Grabbe believed that the defeat of Shamil's forces on the way would weaken the morale of the garrison at Akhulgo and deny support from natives on the left bank of the Andi River. In addition, success along this axis would secure an exposed section of Russian defensive positions shielding Tarku and the Kumyk plain.[22] Then, upon arriving at Ashilta, a village near Akhulgo on the Andi River, the Russians would be able to establish communications lines through Khunzakh to Temir-Khan-Shura.

Departing from Vnezapnaia on 21 May, Grabbe's so-called Chechen detachment (*otriad*) passed through the mountain ridge separating Salatau from the Kumyk tribes and made camp in the Tala-su valley with 6,616 men and 16 field guns. The arrival of 2 additional battalions from the Apsheron Regiment—with 1 more to come later—brought the total strength of the force to 9 battalions or about 8,000 men. The column carried supplies with it sufficient for the trek through Gumbet, from which point, after crossing the Andi River, it would be essential to open communications lines to Temir-Khan-Shura for resupply. On 25—26 May, the column completed a perilous crossing of the pass at Sauk-bulakh. Every step of the cluttered trail had to be cleared of rocks and debris as the troops advanced along a steep incline for some twelve miles. Upon reaching the snowy top, the column was running short of water and fuel. The subsequent descent of the ponderous force toward Gumbet was no less trying, requiring single-file movement down the rocky slope.[23]

By 30 May, the column trudged ahead to the fortified village of Arguani, where Shamil waited with a force estimated at 16,000 tribesmen, most of them Lezgians. Shamil's decision to stand fast forced Grabbe's hand. Given the extreme difficulty and military risk of withdrawal as well as his own eagerness to engage the enemy, Grabbe resolved to take the mountaineer positions by storm. Grabbe divided his force, posing two-battalion columns




Map 3. The Akhulgo campaign, 1839



An early print shows a Russian column proceeding along a narrow mountain road in the Caucasus. The rugged terrain and fortified town suggest the difficulties faced by commanders and troops.

against the flanks of the fortified village. His column commanders personally reconnoitered the approaches to Arguani and at 1700 began their assault on a broad front. The Russians broke into the village on 1 June and cleared it building by building, as the battle quickly dissolved into countless small struggles.[24] Lieutenant Dmitrii A. Miliutin, an officer of the Russian General Staff (later a historian of this campaign and the Russian minister of war), recorded the following description:

> At 9 AM our troops were already in occupation of the greater part of the village, and even of the flat roofs of those houses where the Murids still defended themselves, but the bloodshed continued the whole day through until dark. The only way to drive the Murids out of the saklias [dwellings] was to break holes through the roofs and throw down burning substances, and so set fire to the beams. Even then they remained many hours in the houses, though sometimes they found means to break through and secretly pass from one dwelling to another but many bodies were found completely charred. In spite of their disadvantageous position . . . the most fanatic amongst them were satisfied if they could destroy even some of the infidels.[25]

Shamil realized that his position was collapsing and retreated. The 2-day battle ended in the destruction of Arguani and cost Grabbe 30 officers and 611 men. Shamil lost perhaps 2,000 warriors in the desperate engagement.[26]

Before pressing on, the Russians systematically demolished the 500 or so stone dwellings that once made up the village. The fall of Arguani opened the way to Akhulgo, to which Shamil had withdrawn with his most dedicated followers. The Russians marched to the village of Chirkat, overlooking the Andi River, and paused to restore the bridge, which had been burned by the natives. While waiting for the engineers to finish their work (never actually completed for lack of materials), Grabbe dispatched a "flying detachment" (*letuchii otriad*—a highly mobile unit) consisting of two battalions of the Kurin Regiment and all of his cavalry to meet a supply column from Temir-Khan-Shura (traveling under the escort of friendly native militia) to assist it across the Andi River at Sagrytl. Securing the route toward Temir-Khan-Shura was now more critical because insurgents in Grabbe's rear had cut the road back to Vnezapnaia. Once new supplies were brought forward, Grabbe, now with a foothold on both sides of the river, advanced to Ashilta and then to Akhulgo.

At Akhulgo, which had a total population of only 4,000 (including not more than a thousand armed fighters), Shamil busied himself with the recruitment of additional warriors from other area villages. Akhulgo actually comprised three separate defensive positions. Old and New Akhulgo lay on the opposite sides of a deep river gorge (linked only by a few wooden bridges) and together occupied a notch in the Andi River that covered all approaches from the east, north, and west. To the south, or forward from New Akhulgo, stood Surkhai's "tower," a stone fortification atop a treacherously steep crag with a commanding view of the ground that any attacker must cross. The tower also served as the key communications link between the fortifications of Old and New Akhulgo. Having learned the value of artificial barriers, the mountaineers supplemented their natural defensive positions by erecting stone walls and connecting trench lines in front of the tower and the village.[27]

By the time he reached Akhulgo, Grabbe's effective force numbered about 6,000 men and several thousand native militia. Lacking the strength to impose a full blockade on Akhulgo, Grabbe made a futile effort to lay siege to the village from the southern side of the Andi River, establishing a cordon of small advance posts and moving them forward nightly (under cover of darkness) to tighten the noose. Yet as long as Shamil retained communications across the river, the attempt was doomed to failure. Each effort to tighten the blockade brought significant Russian losses, as many of the men had no idea how best to employ the terrain for cover. Furthermore, Grabbe lacked enough engineers, artillery, and shells to mount a full-scale effort.[28] Meanwhile, Shamil attempted to seize the initiative by placing a force on a ridge near Ashilta, thereby immediately threatening the Russian headquarters staff. Luckily for Grabbe, the Russians detected preparations for an attack and drove the mountaineers off.

Shortly, Grabbe refocused his efforts on the blockade of Akhulgo, establishing six battery positions and deploying sapper units along the river banks. His success depended first of all on the capture of Surkhai's tower, which, though defended by a mere hundred men, proved an extremely difficult objective. On 29 June, three batteries of light field guns opened fire on the tower but, due to the steep angle of fire, had little effect against the rock piles obscuring the fortifications.[29] After this brief and useless preparation, 2 battalions of the Kurin Regiment and one each from the Apsheron and Kabardian Regiments attempted to scale the heights and storm the tower but were driven back at a cost of 315 casualties.[30] The mountaineers paid a high price as well, losing the fiery commander of the position, Ali Bek. Grabbe immediately resolved to try again, this time shifting four field guns to the eastern side of the crag where he knew the angle of fire was less steep and the possible result more favorable.[31] Continuous pounding here, made possible by ammunition resupply from a caravan from Temir-Khan-Shura, eventually drove the defenders from their positions.

The fall of Surkhai's tower altered the tactical situation sharply. The Russians were now able to draw in their siege lines tightly around Akhulgo and mount two light guns on the rubble atop the tower. With the arrival of three additional battalions on 12 July, Grabbe made the abrupt decision to storm Akhulgo on the 16th. This decision, based in part on intelligence reports that enemy morale was poor,[32] greatly surprised Miliutin, who at the general's request had just completed a new scheme for the placement of Russian forces in anticipation of continuing the siege:

> We could not explain to ourselves what aroused our command to set about such an important, difficult feat so suddenly, without any advance preparatory measures. We had hardly even succeeded in forming our dispositions and distributing our forces; at our batteries there were not stored sufficient shells; there was not time by means of our preliminary artillery fire to ease the path of the infantry.[33]

Grabbe, nonetheless, organized three attack columns, the strongest consisting of three battalions under Lieutenant General (Baron) Vrangel, and struck directly at New Akhulgo, while the others did just enough to tie up enemy forces and sow confusion. The second column, a single battalion, moved against Old Akhulgo, and the third, one and one-half battalions, occupied the gorge of the Ashilta River to ensure the isolation of respective enemy garrisons in Old and New Akhulgo. After an artillery preparation, the assault began. Vrangel's battalions encountered many obstacles and deadly cross fire in the narrow sector in front of New Akhulgo and were soon pinned down, managing to withdraw only under the cover of night with over 800 casualties. Every officer in Vrangel's command was killed or wounded. The Russians estimated Shamil's losses at 150 after the first day of fighting.[34]

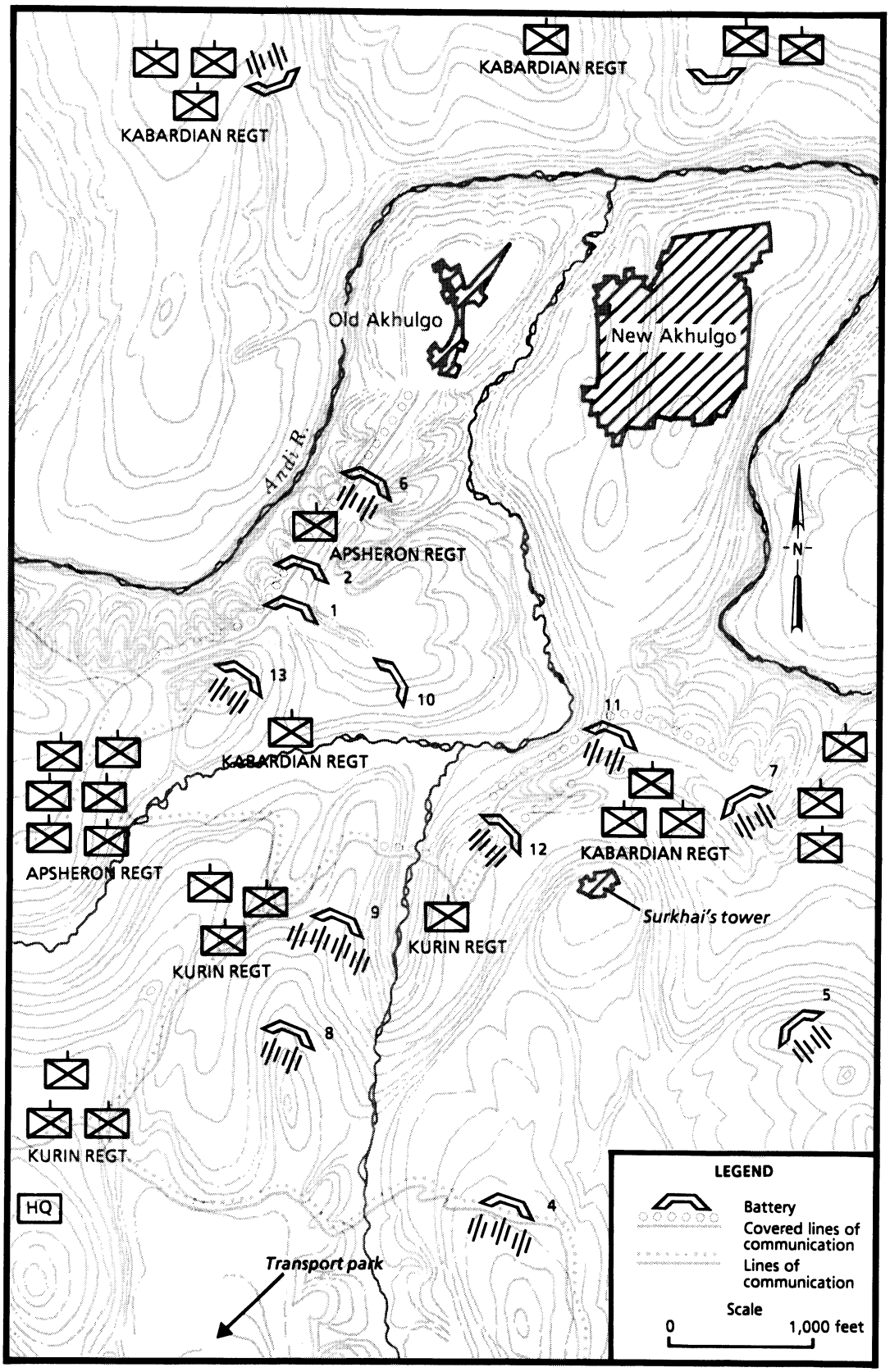
Undeterred, Grabbe resumed his blockade and sent 4 squadrons of cavalry (of varying size) to seal off the left bank of the river opposite Akhulgo, thereby curtailing further supply or escape for Shamil, who had evacuated his wounded and had perhaps 1,800 men remaining at his dis-

posal. A standoff persisted for the next several weeks, during which living conditions in Akhulgo deteriorated rapidly and disease tore into the strength of the defenders. Groping for an escape from his predicament, Shamil offered to negotiate and even delivered his own twelve-year-old son to Grabbe as proof of his earnest desire for a settlement. However, a brief meeting with Grabbe—who would accept no terms short of surrender—achieved nothing. By mid-August, the ravages of poor sanitation and illness took a toll on the Russians as well, reducing the average battalion to a strength of about 450 able men (for Russian deployments, see map 4).[35]

Grabbe now realized that delay was costly and planned another general assault for 17 August. Once again, he dispatched three columns against the mountaineer stronghold. The main force of three battalions struck the walls of New Akhulgo and easily pierced the outer defenses. A desperate Shamil sent out his son one more time under a white flag, and talks resumed briefly but to no effect. The antagonists rejoined the battle on 21 August. Amid fierce fighting, Shamil managed to slip away with his family. The Russians took 900 prisoners, most of them women and children, some of whom, in the end, opted for death over captivity. In all, the 80-day campaign for Akhulgo cost Russia over 3,000 casualties and produced a deceptive result. Strictly speaking, the capture of Akhulgo had been a military success. The enemy stronghold had fallen, Grabbe had demonstrated Russia's ability to drive deep into the mountains against great obstacles, and Shamil had lost many of his staunchest warriors. Moreover, the imam himself had barely escaped. But as Dubrovin observed, the "brilliant action of [Russian] forces and the huge loss in men brought no result and did not impress the mountaineers with our strength."[36]

In the wake of Russia's "victory" at Akhulgo, Shamil emerged stronger than before. His prestige fortified by the inevitable retreat of Russian troops, he rallied the mountain tribes and carried out a series of offensive actions heretofore unthinkable. Russian influence in Dagestan, Chechnia, and Avaria plummeted, but the damage was not confined to the eastern Caucasus. The Cherkes tribes in the west also rose and devastated Russia's Black Sea garrisons.[37] In 1842, Grabbe mounted an expedition against Shamil's new center at Dargo and this time failed utterly. Short of water, badly strung out over a soggy trail in inclement weather, and constantly harassed by enemy fire in the thick Chechen forests, the Russian column had to turn back without reaching its objective. The resulting consternation in St. Petersburg was so great that the war minister, Prince Chernyshev, suspended military operations and visited the Caucasus to make a personal assessment. The mountaineers exploited the pause to overrun Avaria, and in 1843, Shamil launched a broad offensive.

Shamil's campaign against Russian forts in Avaria marked his maturation as a military planner and, in particular, his ability to grasp the strategic situation and implement a broad plan.[38] Undetected by the Russians, on 28 August 1843, 3 separate forces of mountaineers, numbering about 10,000 men in all, suddenly converged on Untsoikul, where they outmaneuvered a




Map 4. Russian positions, 4—22 August 1839 (up to the capture of Akhulgo)

Russian column and killed 486 officers and men. Two days later, they captured the local garrison. Within the next 4 weeks, Shamil laid waste to every Russian outpost in Avaria save one and inflicted a total of over 2,000 casualties.[39] While the Russians were still in disarray, but assuming that the worst had passed, Shamil seized Gergebil at the junction of the Avar and Kazi-kumuch Rivers, from which he could command the only communications route linking Avaria to the Russian base at Temir-Khan-Shura. By feigning preparations for an invasion of the Kumyk plain, Shamil succeeded in drawing Russian forces away from Gergebil, which fell into his hands after a protracted struggle.[40] Such rapid, well-disguised, and skillfully executed movements enabled Shamil's guerrilla army to seize and hold the initiative and befuddle the Russians.

## *Russian Analysis and Reassessment*

The disasters of 1840—43 did not bring about an immediate change in Russia's conduct of the war in the Caucasus, but the foundation for a new approach was being developed. In fact, the central elements that might contribute to a methodical reduction of the Caucasus had been identified years before. Ermolov himself once observed that "not the bayonet but the axe" would prove the key to pacification of the region.[41] The key was to clear and hold a road net through the Caucasus. Ermolov, however, never possessed the manpower necessary to implement such a policy. Another who foresaw, to some degree, the ultimate methods of subjugation was General A. A. Veliaminov, who wrote a lengthy commentary in 1832 in which he advocated the gradual extension of forts into enemy territory as well as the establishment of settlements by the Cossacks. This expedient would block the path of invading mountaineers. Yet, he cautioned, this method alone would not yield victory for another thirty years. Rapid progress required the creation of 5 independent military columns about 7,000 strong to carry out relentless campaigns against the sanctuaries and economic base of the mountaineers. Only when deprived of the material means to carry on would they submit.[42]

One fact apparent to analysts of the late 1830s and early 1840s was that the Russians could not pacify the mountaineers until they were able to strike at their villages with impunity. Two of the most insightful observers of the situation were young officers of the General Staff, Captain (after his first Caucasus tour) Dmitrii Miliutin and Captain I. Mochulskii, who accepted temporary assignments in the Caucasus to gain a better practical understanding of their craft. Indeed, there being no active theater of conventional combat, the Academy of the General Staff looked upon the Caucasus as a "combat school" for young officers.[43]

Mochulskii spent a tour of duty in the Caucasus in 1837. Miliutin followed in 1839 and again in 1843. Mochulskii wrote a study on his return that identified the principal causes of Russian failure in the Caucasus. Mochulskii noted the advantages afforded the enemy by the extremely difficult terrain as well as the potent blend of spiritual and military power

inherent in the resistance movement. Nevertheless, Mochulskii attributed most causes of failure directly to Russian shortcomings. For example, he believed Russian officers were inexperienced and had inadequate tactical training for mountain warfare. They neither knew the terrain of the Caucasus nor understood how to use it for such purposes as setting up an ambush. In addition, Russian forces were not properly equipped and wore the same woolen coats, socks, and boot linings through winter and summer alike. They also suffered from boredom and poor morale. Furthermore, given their European-style training, commanders were intellectually wedded to heavy artillery and cumbersome supply trains that left them too dependent on a poor road system.[44]

Both Mochulskii and Miliutin emphasized the absence of any coherent policy by the Russians in the Caucasus as a crucial factor in the squandering of past efforts. Diverging from Veliaminov's appraisal, each lamented the maintenance of over 150 forts, which they saw as a hopeless dispersal of available manpower. They believed such small garrisons could not control substantial territory and often were not secure themselves.[45] Advancing suggestions of his own in a memorandum titled "Thoughts About the Means of Establishing Russian Rule in the Caucasus," Miliutin called for a reduction in the number of forts, preserving only those in strategic locations to control the main tribes and guarantee principal communications routes. Given large garrisons, such forts could serve as bases from which powerful mobile columns could move at any time to restore order or extend a zone of Russian control. Miliutin hoped that through a more systematic military penetration of the Caucasus, a cultural policy less antagonistic to local customs, and the promotion of trade and industry, Russia ultimately could persuade most of the Caucasian population of the advantages—not to mention the inevitability—of imperial rule.[46]

Notwithstanding such analysis, the Russian command in St. Petersburg and the Caucasus failed to craft a systematic approach to conquest. Still, the Russians had by 1840 made significant tactical adjustments. Recognizing the vulnerability of columns extended on the march, commanders, wherever conditions permitted, came to employ a close, rectangular formation, the length of which depended on the size of the supply train and other factors. The sides of the column reached from the advance guard to the rear guard. Cavalry, artillery, and transport moved within the rectangle, while groups of sharpshooters formed an outer security cordon.[47] The Russians also made a practice of forming square encampments, placing the infantry and artillery on the sides. Smaller forces often formed their supply wagons into a laager. In addition, given the importance they placed on mobility, the Russians developed a light mountain gun (a portable artillery piece) for use in the Caucasus, and the Caucasian Corps deployed Russia's first mountain gun battery in its organization in 1842.[48]

## *Final Phase of the War*

Count M. S. Vorontsov assumed command in the Caucasus in 1844 and, though named viceroy with full military and civil authority, found

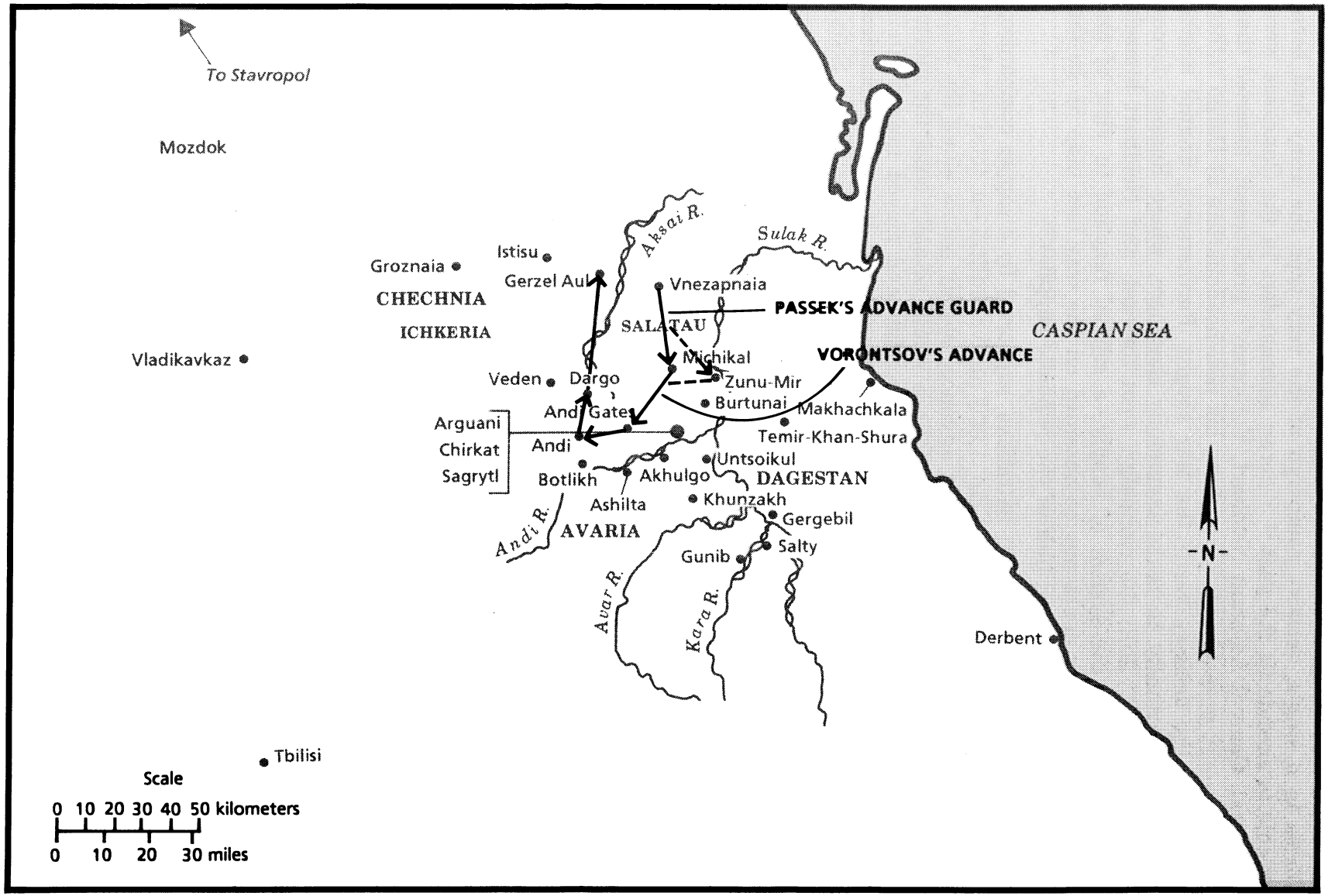
himself under immediate pressure from Tsar Nicholas to annihilate Shamil's forces in a single, decisive campaign of the very type the army had been unable to execute in the past.[49] Veteran commanders in the Caucasus were skeptical. General Adjutant Neidhart, Vorontsov's predecessor, asserted that Shamil would probably withdraw from his new headquarters at Dargo rather than offer the decisive battle the tsar sought. Furthermore, Shamil might take the opportunity to make incursions elsewhere, where Russian forces would be weak.[50] Still, the campaign went forward, and Neidhart himself worked to secure the system of supply—a critical function in view of the fact that provisions could not be obtained on the way (see map 5). In the end, native bearers moved half of the requisite supplies.[51]

Vorontsov took 42 guns; 21 battalions, supported by 4 sapper companies; 1,600 irregular cavalry; and about 1,000 native militia—a total of about 18,000 men. Some were to remain at advanced supply points along the way, and a force estimated at thirteen battalions would actually enter the mountains.[52] The forces assembled in Salatau in May and moved toward Andi with the appearance of the first grass in the mountains. Vorontsov occupied Kyrk Pass on 5 June, leaving an occupying force of five battalions. Soon, he ran into foul weather.

On 6 June, General Passek led the advance guard in pursuit of an enemy force about ten miles ahead of the main column. Without orders and neglecting to send word back to the main column, Passek proceeded to the heights of Zunu-Mir. The problem with this move was that Vorontsov intended to take the column to Andi via Michikal, not Zunu-Mir.

Thus, by the time Passek halted in the bitter cold at Zunu-Mir, he faced a dilemma. Though short of supplies and out of contact with the main column, he dared not withdraw for fear that the appearance of a retreat would rally more of the native populace around Shamil. When Vorontsov finally learned of the situation, he directed Passek to send back only his cavalry and mounted native militia, there being no forage for the horses at Zunu-Mir.[53] The action came too late, however, to save some 500 horses from breakdown. In addition, approximately 450 men suffered frostbite before Vorontsov reached Passek on 11 June.[54]

All the while, Shamil remained just out of reach of the Russian advance and refused to give battle even at the so-called Andi Gates, a principal passageway into hostile Lezgian territory. Instead, the wily guerrilla leader pulled back the remaining ten miles to Dargo. Finally, on 4 July, with only a six-day supply of provisions remaining,[55] Vorontsov decided to march on Dargo with his main force. At about the same time, he relayed word to General Freitag, commander of the Left Flank of the Caucasian Line (at the northern edge of Dagestan), to be prepared to lead a column in support of a possible exit of the expedition from Dargo in that direction. On 7 July, after a brief but fierce fight, the Russians took Dargo but, as in the past, not Shamil. Nor, with a total force of 7,940 infantry, 1,218 cavalry, 342 artillerymen and 16 guns, had they managed to administer a sound beating to the enemy. The mountaineers (mostly Chechens) vanished into




Map 5. The Dargo campaign, 1845

the forest—but remained nearby, convinced that an opportunity to destroy Vorontsov's column would come as it departed through Ichkeria.[56]

Having raised the flag at Dargo, Vorontsov's immediate concern was to ensure the arrival of his latest, and urgently awaited, supply column. On 9 July, he split his force, sending half his infantry, cavalry, and artillery in a detachment under Lieutenant General K. von Klugenau to meet the train and lead it through the forests. In particular, Vorontsov's decision to encumber the escort force with artillery and cavalry in unsuitable forest terrain drew criticism from later analysts. Passek blazed the trail for Klugenau with the advance guard, encountering many obstacles (such as piles of felled trees) erected by the mountaineers to impede any Russian withdrawal. In the process of clearing the barriers of enemy fighters and struggling with unseen snipers in the forests, the column began to disintegrate, presenting just the opportunity the mountaineers sought. In the disaster that followed, the guerrillas swarmed around isolated groups of men, killing Passek along with 556 officers and men.[57] A dispirited Klugenau almost abandoned the attempt to return to Dargo in favor of a retreat through Dagestan, but after a grim march, he rejoined Vorontsov and the main column.

On 11 July, the reunited force embarked on a difficult journey, not over the route by which it had come, but in the direction of the village of Gerzel Aul so as to prevent, as before, the appearance of a retreat. On the first day of the march, repeating the mistake of Passek's advance guard, the 3d Battalion of the Lublin Jaeger Regiment rushed ahead to attack hastily formed enemy positions along the road, which resulted in its own temporary isolation and left a unit of sappers exposed whose task it was to clear the road. Soon, the supply train of the main column was under attack. By the time Klugenau (entrusted by Vorontsov with operational control of the column) restored order, his losses after two days of fighting mounted to 553 killed and almost 800 wounded.[58]

On the night of 12 July, Vorontsov sent five copies of an order to General Freitag by five different routes requesting that he come immediately to meet the expedition in the vicinity of Gerzel Aul.[59] The next day, Vorontsov's column, with eleven badly depleted battalions, advanced along the Aksai River in textbook fashion, with advance and rear guards drawn in close to the main column and an infantry cordon on either side (see table 1). The Russian column encountered resistance en route, and a serious action on 16 July cost Vorontsov 103 men killed and an additional 372 wounded.[60]

By now, Vorontsov could go on no longer. His strongest battalion was reduced to 300 combat-ready infantrymen, and he had 1,500 sick and wounded to care for. Moreover, his artillery had lost 400 of 635 horses and most of its guns had to be destroyed. As of 17 July, Vorontsov's remaining artillery consisted of two light field guns and six mountain guns.[61] Luckily, his messengers had successfully slipped through guerrilla lines, and on 18 July, a relief column under Freitag's command arrived. The expedition was

## TABLE 1
## Vorontsov's Column Order

Advance guard under Major General Beliavskii
- 3d Battalion, Apsheron Regiment
- 1st Battalion, Lublin Jaeger Regiment
- 5th Sapper Battalion
- 3 companies, Caucasian Rifle Battalion
- 4 mountain guns, Number 3 Battery
- Assorted mounted militia

Main column under Lieutenant General von Klugenau
- 1st Battalion, Lithuanian Jaeger Regiment
- 2d Battalion, Zamotsk Jaeger Regiment
- 3d Battalion, Lublin Jaeger Regiment
- 2 light field guns, Number 7 Battery
- 2 mountain guns, Number 1 Battery
- 3 mountain guns, Number 3 Battery
- Supply train and the wounded

Rear Guard under Major General Labyntsov
- 1st and 2d Battalions, Prince Chernyshev Regiment
- 2 mountain guns, Number 3 Battery
- Assorted Cossacks

Right Cordon
- 3d and 4th Battalions, Navagin Infantry Regiment
- Gurian Militia
- Tiflis Druzhina (troop), Georgian Militia

Left Cordon
- Composite (*svodnyi*) Battalion, Kurin Regiment
- Guria Druzhina, Georgian Militia

*Source*: L.-D.G., "Pokhod 1845 goda," 56.

saved, but only after total casualties of 3 generals, 186 officers, and 3,321 men.[62]

Despite its tragic dimensions, the Dargo expedition provided the impetus for a crucial change in Russia's approach to the war. Never again would a large Russian column drive into the mountains without first having completely secured its rear and lines of communication.[63] Vorontsov resolved that Russia must henceforth move forward slowly, securing the plains and foothills before trying to corner Shamil in the mountains. In particular, Large and Small Chechnia now stood out as the focal point of Russian operations. Reduction of the Chechnian forests and foothills would eventually deprive Shamil of a critical source of manpower and provisions and make possible a direct advance into deepest Dagestan.[64]

The year 1846 marked the beginning of a new phase in the Caucasian War—in no small measure because Nicholas refrained from further inter-